

50 Years and Counting

As Shakespeare once wrote, “What’s in a name?”

This month, as we kick off a year-long series of events celebrating ARS’s 50th anniversary, it’s a good time to pause and think about the mission and accomplishments that lie behind our name—the Agricultural Research Service—and the opportunities ahead for further achievements and public service.

Our name may be simple and to the point, but our mission is large. We develop new knowledge and technology needed to solve broad-scope, long-term, high-priority problems that must be resolved to continue to produce the wide variety of high-quality, safe food, fiber, and other agricultural products demanded by American consumers and the world.

Our research contributes to the scientific foundation necessary to sustain a viable and competitive food and agricultural economy and gives environmental managers and stewards the information they need to protect and maintain our natural resource base. In short, we are a problem-solving agency.

We are also the people who provide the factual basis for decisions, policies, and activities of the regulatory and action agencies—to ensure that when they make a rule or establish a policy, they’re doing it based on sound science. Last, but certainly not least, we ensure that everyone has access to this new agricultural information.

Though our name is just half a century old, our roots go back almost to the creation of the Department of Agriculture itself in 1862. In fact, our present-day mission is very closely aligned with the original act creating USDA and signed by Abraham Lincoln, which called for a “Department of Agriculture, the general design and duties of which shall be to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with agriculture in the most general and comprehensive sense of that word.” Recognition of the critical role of science in agriculture was at the heart of the new department; within 4 years of the start of USDA, a Division of Botany was created, soon followed by a Division of Microscopy and, in 1873, a Bureau of Animal Industry—the first of many scientific bureaus within USDA that would be merged, in 1953, to form the Agricultural Research Service.

While farmers have always been great experimenters, and American industry has always been a world leader in innovation, inevitably there will be some problems too complex, too time-consuming, and too exploratory for any individual farmer or company to take on. That is government’s role: ARS has the scientific expertise and resources to address those problems that others won’t tackle but which, at the same time, must

be resolved if we are to continue to feed and clothe America without compromising our environment in the process.

Our network of laboratories across the country (and a handful overseas) gives us the ability to address specific problems locally while also providing a national perspective on the “big picture” issues. At any given time, ARS has more than 1,000 research projects under way, each of which is incorporated into one of 22 national programs, each under the direction of a national program leader. We carefully plan and coordinate the project components of each national program and keep a careful accounting of who’s doing what and where—and thus ensure that each research activity is relevant and meritorious, has utility, and is otherwise the wisest use of public resources.

Our unique structure—for we are, in fact, the largest science organization in the world dedicated specifically to agricultural research—enables us to respond quickly, on virtually any scientific subject and in any part of the country, to address problems as soon as they arise. We already have on board the expertise and the research facilities to “turn on a dime,” as the old saying goes, whenever and wherever the problem occurs, whether it’s a new crop insect pest or a livestock disease.

Though most Americans today are far removed from the farm, it’s hard to imagine anyone in this country whose life our research has not touched in some way. From the permanent press cotton clothing we wear to the ink used to print our newspapers and the nutritional guidelines that help us maintain a healthy lifestyle, ARS’s handiwork is evidenced in our lives every day. ARS is not just an agency for the farmers and ranchers of this country; we serve all Americans and have played a vital role in bringing many useful consumer products to the marketplace. (You can read about our many consumer-oriented accomplishments in the online publication “Science in Your Shopping Cart,” available at www.ars.usda.gov/is/np/shopcartintro.html.)

As our history has shown, ARS is in it for the long haul. While we certainly can, and do, address the problems of the moment, we also have an eye on the future, and our capability for long-term, sustained research enables us to start laying the foundations today for solving the agricultural and environmental problems of tomorrow. So while we’re very happy and proud to be marking our 50th anniversary and all our achievements of the past half-century, we’re also excited about the future and the critical role that ARS will undoubtedly continue to play in ensuring that our agricultural industry can meet the needs of the American consumer and the world.

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